

# H-Net Reviews

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*D-Day Sixtieth Anniversary Exhibition.* Imperial War Museum, London.

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During the Easter holiday, I went to the “special exhibition marking the sixtieth anniversary of the biggest and most complex combined operation in history,” as the Press Notice presented it. It was not unexpectedly crowded, with people taking no notice of the recommended circuit and creating “traffic jams,” as clusters of visitors gathered around specific showcases. The crowds were a sign that the exhibit was a great popular success—commensurate to the momentous event (“the biggest combined operation ever seen in history”) that the exhibit aimed to commemorate, explain, and illustrate. <p> There are already a number of D-Day museums in Britain and Normandy, and therefore the curators of the Imperial War Museum have chosen a fresh angle of approach, striving to “show the events of the day itself through the personal experiences of those who took part.” Thus, there is naturally a very copious mention of the great military commanders: General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh Mallory, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, General Sir Bernard Montgomery (as he then was), Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Morgan, Major General Sir Percy Hobart, Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt—with appropriate photographs and personal objects. But the “personal stories” of anonymous and lesser-known participants are far more numerous. They are presented in connection with diaries, letters, mementos, and personal belongings. These “personal stories” are based on an archetypal style of representing those who “did their bit” for D-Day. This includes the soldiers, seamen, and airmen, of course, but also the nurses, ambulance drivers, chaplains, engineers, meteorologists, pigeon-breeders and pigeons, secretaries (WRENs or other), secret agents, resistance fighters, cameramen, war correspondents, and war artists.

Hence, the <cite>D-Day Sixtieth Anniversary Exhibition</cite> becomes a deliberate mix of the epic/heroic and trivial/anecdotal (with all shades in between), aiming to offer a <cite>mÃ©lange des genres</cite> of the kind that an older school of museography strove to avoid at all costs.[1] <p> As one enters the exhibition area, one is spoiled by a choice of different options. Most visitors will probably be attracted to the central “table,” which has an audio-visual narrative of the main episodes related to the landings, full of useful information such as the fact that 132,000 men were on shore by the end of the day (with 10,200 casualties). <p> The first display wall proper, which is mainly devoted to planning and preparation (including Intelligence), starts with the well-known photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Stalin and Winston Churchill at the Teheran Conference (December 1943), where final plans for the Second Front were discussed with Stalin. Also shown is an earlier telegram (December 1942) by Churchill explaining to Stalin that Roosevelt had to be consulted on the decision to open a Second Front. The visitor is expected to naturally see the connection between the two. <p> Government intelligence depended on the most basic fact-gathering much more than it did upon secret investigations, and in 1942 the British population was asked to send postcards and photographs from old Continental holidays to the Admiralty— thus providing the military authorities with a unique range of views about the terrain. Also ingenious was the good use made of the special talents of Resistance fighters like Bernard Duval: “As an art student he was able to sketch the defenses around Ouistreham from memory and pass details to London via the Resistance.” This display was complemented by a photo reconnaissance, and overall, the exhibition had many original aerial photographs of the various landing spots. The classic kit of the secret agent in the popular imagination

was represented by the “Pen supplied by SOE in which Brooks [Anthony Brooks, organizer of the SOE Pimento network] concealed the micro-photograph of his D-day messages.” <p> More sophisticated was the deception of persuading Germans their hypothesis that the main attack would take place in the Straits of Dover was correct. Among other devices, this involved the “creation” of a bogus American force stationed in the South-East, the First US Army Group (“FUSAG”), complete with dummy tanks and fake radio-traffic. <p> The world of espionage and counter-espionage, with double agents showing a duplicity even more spectacular in real life than in spy novels, is magnificently represented by the “Iron Cross, Second Class”—a medal awarded by the Germans to the Spanish-born secret agent Juan Pujol Garcia (code name “Garbo”) on 29 July 1944, though he never actually received it— concurrent to his “Badge of Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, Military Division, as awarded to Garbo by King George VI in December 1944.” “Garbo” actively participated in the deception plan by giving his German “employers” (in reality, he worked for MI5) false information on the proposed landings near Calais. <p> There is a full discussion of the technical and logistical aspects of the operation, which includes various documents and artefacts. For a personal approach, the exhibit includes a memo signed by Churchill on 30 May 1942 spelling out the general specifications for the “Mulberry” artificial harbor, and informative notices on the complex problems that will need to be solved. Next to the signed document, one can see various tools, a passport, and the Certificate of Apprenticeship (“Professional Training School of the Jewish Community, Frankfurt am Main, April 1939”—he was then 17) of an “ordinary” German Jew who fled to Britain and found employment in an engineering firm connected with Mulberry work. In this field, the Imperial War Museum cannot of course compete with the Museum at Arromanches, from whose windows one can actually see the remains of the sunken blockships at low tide. But the IWM gets its own back by displaying a remarkable “Sectioned coupling joint from ‘PLUTO’”—the “Pipe-Line Under The Ocean” which supplied, we are told, “112 million gallons of fuel” to Allied forces. <p> No discussion of D-Day engineering feats would be complete without a full display of some models of Major-General Sir Percy Hobart’s “funnies”—the specially adapted armored vehicles he designed after drawing the lessons of the Dieppe disaster (August 1942)—notably the AVRE tanks. The exhibit description clearly explains the technical problems to be solved, namely how to allow the tanks to make progress on soft sand and loose shingle, and how to bridge the

anti-tank ditches and overcome the formidable obstacle of the “Atlantic Wall” (A “German Schutzwall medal given to those who worked on the German defences” is shown in another case, among various other German exhibits, mostly of small arms, but curiously including Rommel’s death certificate). <p> Less technically sophisticated, but equally essential to the logistics of the whole operation, was the humble “sea-sickness bag issued to D-Day soldiers,” which now graces the Museum’s collections. A commentary suggests that the bags were widely used, owing to the rough weather on the Channel. But I did not see any reference to the notion, widely broadcast in the literature on the Second World War, that the gale conditions were in fact a godsend to the Allies since Rommel had relaxed his vigilance, in the belief that no “invasion” was possible in such weather. <p> Logically enough, the section of the exhibit on actual operations start with the subject of air cover, although for some reason we are not explicitly reminded that the Allies benefited from an absolute mastery over the air in the area, a point which teachers with school parties should perhaps not forget to explain, as this was a precondition for the success of the amphibious assault (the explanation, “On D-Day the Allied air forces flew over 14,000 sorties in support of the landings, almost unchallenged by the Luftwaffe” is probably too allusive for schoolchildren). Not unexpectedly, a pride of place is displayed through the many uniforms and personal items of the Royal Air Force. It is interesting to note that among the various objects “carried by RAF Sergeant Bernard Morgan while serving with No. 83 Group Control Centre, RAF, 2nd Tactical Air Force, on D-Day,” many could have been recommended by Murray’s or other guide books to the Continent: “tin of water purifying tablets; French phrasebook; and RAF editions of the New Testament and the Gospel of St John.” But we can also see the “Flying Log Book of Flight Sergeant F.R. Bagshaw of the Royal Canadian Air Force.” The log book is connected with one major aspect of the air operations, the airborne attacks, including the famous glider landings by Major Howard’s men, fifty yards from “Pegasus Bridge” (at BÃ©nouville, on the Orne, north of Caen) which they captured in ten minutes. The artifacts include Howard’s famous whistle (“Whistle used by Howard to signal V for Victory at Pegasus Bridge on D-Day”), used as an aid for “British paratroopers who had been blown off course.” <p> Next to the showcase is a handset which enables the visitor to hear Howard’s own account of the successful glider operation. Throughout the exhibit, many other opportunities to listen to participants’ recollections (there were queues forming in front of many of the sets on the day I went—

a sure sign of success). Most of these recollections were from "ordinary people," but some were more prominent figures, like William Millin, the D-Day piper immortalized by the film, <cite>The Longest Day</cite> (incidentally, the origin of this phrase is recalled on a wall quotation: "The first 24 hours of the invasion will be decisive. For the Allies as well as Germany, it will be the longest day. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel"). Of particular historic importance is the recording in which "John Snagge, the BBC newsreader, announces the first official communiqu  of the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944." <p> A very intriguing anecdotal exhibit that complements the "Pegasus Bridge" section is the "Bottle of wine hidden from the Germans by the Gondr e family during the war." The caption tells us that "Their home beside Pegasus Bridge was the first to be liberated on D-Day" (we are informed that Howard landed at 00:06) and that the object is "Lent by Arlette Gondr e Pritchett." She is the daughter of Georges Gondr e, the owner of the "home," which appropriately enough happened to be a caf , now housing a small private museum belonging to the family. Gondr e's oral account can be heard from a handset. The full context is given in an excellent caption. <p> Also highly anecdotal is the story of Gustav, the pigeon sent from the approaching ships, who carried a D-Day message for the Reuters News Agency. We learn from the pigeon's "personal story," with a caption that: "His epic flight back to his loft at Thorney Island in Portsmouth took 5 hours and 16 minutes and covered some 150 miles' and earned him the Dickin Medal, the 'animal VC.'" There is no doubt that, in addition to pigeon-fanciers, the younger generations will be thrilled by this extraordinary story. <p> Next comes a description of the naval operations (code-named "Operation Neptune"), with an excellent caption recalling the crucial and under-acknowledged role of the Royal Navy. Due to its neglect in popular accounts, the description will be particularly useful to "ordinary" visitors. The "Diagram showing shipping channels which had been cleared of mines for Operation Neptune" clearly shows the importance of the Navy officers' navigating skills—the other major hazard being German coastal batteries as the ships approached, as some of the exhibits make it clear. <p> The Exhibition has separate showcases for each of the four beaches. The "US M1 steel helmet as worn by American soldiers on D-Day," which can be seen in hundreds of museums, and bought in thousands of flea markets all over the world—is nonetheless a "must" in a showcase devoted to Omaha Beach. As Herbert von Karajan used to say, "When conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, I always think of the

young person in the back row who hears it for the first time." Likewise, no doubt some young visitors will actually see this world-famous D-Day helmet for the first time. As an interesting parallel, the showcase on Gold Beach has a "Mark III steel helmet specially issued to assault formations of 21st Army Group," and the "Royal Armoured Corps steel helmet worn by Ian Hammerton on D-Day" from Juno Beach. <p> In total contrast, the headgear featured in the Sword Beach showcase afforded no physical protection to its wearer: "Royal Navy chaplain's cap worn on D-Day by the Reverend Maurice Wood (later the Right Reverend The Bishop of Norwich) who landed on Sword beach with Group S1, as chaplain of the Royal Naval Beach Commando. Wood conducted the first communion service on the D-Day beaches." Another case also shows a "Communion set belonging to Captain Leslie Skinner of the Royal Army Chaplain's Department attached to The Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry in 8 Armoured Brigade." We are told that "He used this set to give Communion in the landing craft just before the departure for Normandy." Next to this is the "Diary kept by Captain Skinner in Normandy, and notebook in which he recorded the locations of graves of soldiers he buried in Normandy," which is closely related, since "[t]he cigarette and sweet tins kept in Captain Skinner's communion set were used to contain the personal details of men given temporary burial." <p> Out of all these "Beach" showcases, the grimmest is perhaps the "Flotation belt worn by American soldiers on D-Day," with the commentary: "Many of the soldiers struggled ashore in deep water, or jumped over the side of the landing craft to escape German fire. A flotation belt was a life-saver in many cases." One is left to wonder how many. And Robert Capa's celebrated photograph of the first wave at Omaha Beach shows that the horror was only beginning for those able to keep afloat. <p> The walls also display graphic works from the Museum's vast reserves, starting with a picture of "Headquarters Room, Southwick House, Portsmouth" (1944) commissioned from the war artist Barnett Freedman. In order to paint "The Drop" (1944), the war artist, Albert Richards, actually joined the paratroopers who jumped near the mouth of the Orne just after midnight on D-Day. Among other works of interest are those of Anthony Gross, complemented by various extracts from his diaries and letters. <p> A wall quotation reproduces Churchill's words "in a telegram to Stalin on the afternoon of 6 June 1944": "Everything has started well. The mines, obstacles and land batteries have been largely overcome. The air landings have been very successful and on a large scale. Infantry landings are proceeding rapidly and many tanks and self-propelled

guns are already ashore.“ <p> Of course it did not ”start well“ for all. The Exhibition ends with the tragic story of ”Corporal Peter Earwicker of the 6th Airborne Reconnaissance Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps, [who] was among the thousands of casualties suffered on D-Day and in the campaign which followed in north-west Europe,“ illustrated with a number of doleful letters, which speak for themselves: ”Unfinished letter to Earwicker, written by his sister Joan on 19 June 1944. The letter stopped in mid-sentence when she was informed by telephone that he was missing“; ”Letters from Earwicker’s commanding officer and one of his comrades to his wife. Both confirm that he was not dropped in the right place, but offer some hope that he might either be a prisoner of war or was being sheltered by the Resistance. The areas around the drop zones at both ends of the invasion beachhead were flooded by the Germans and many airborne soldiers who went off course were drowned,“ and finally: ”Letter informing Earwicker’s family that he had been presumed dead by the War Office, August 1945.“ <p> Does the <cite>mÅ©lange des genres</cite> work? the answer to this depends upon one’s expectations of a D-Day Exhibition. The traditional academic visitor will be put off by the crowds, the queues, and the noise (both from the videos and from the public). The space devoted to the Ex-

hibition could have been more generous, considering that a free Exhibition on such a popular subject was bound to be a crowd-puller, with young and noisy visitors. On the other hand, schoolteachers and families will probably enjoy the relaxed atmosphere and deliberate informality which characterizes the rest of the Museum. >From the scholar to the pupil, there is something to learn for everyone at this exhibit. And, in spite of the distractions, the academic specialist of oral and popular history will have a field day. As for ”ordinary“ visitors of all ages, one can presume that the ”anecdotal“ exhibits will entice them to read the contextual captions. This is evidently what the organizers had in mind when mounting this very attractive temporary Exhibition.[2] <p> Notes <p> [1]. The Official Book of the Exhibition is published in partnership with the BBC : Dan Parry: D-Day 6-6-44. The Dramatic Story of the World’s Greatest Invasion. London: BBC Books, 2004 (available from 13 May 2004). <p> [2]. In summer 2004, the Imperial War Museum also organises ’D-Day Duck Tours’ ([...] ”in an extraordinary historic vehicle, which played a vital role in the Normandy landings. The route passes many famous London landmarks and includes a thrilling splashdown into the River Thames“).

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